

Dealing With The Confusions Of Early Sobriety

By Jean Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., WFS Founder

Finally we have quit drinking and our world is going to be set right. Our marriage will now flourish, as it did in the early years, and all the problems with the children will finally be over. And thank heaven, the in-laws and parents will stop the constant haranguing about drinking. And it certainly will be a nice change to hear a few compliments for doing something about the drinking.

What a wonderful dream sequence!

Very likely not a single one of those events will ever take place. And if you waste your time waiting for any of them to happen, then you are still dreaming.

For some very crazy and very human reason, we are under the delusion that when we quit drinking, everything in our life will be wonderful. When it isn't we begin to think we did something wrong. Or we wonder if it's really worth it, this life of sobriety.

But why isn't everything wonderful? Why isn't every problem solved? Why are some members of the family still angry, as if you've committed a crime? And why are the kids so belligerent? And why is it always so tense? And why does everyone speak to you in such a dumb way, like you're not present or conscious?

Early sobriety is the time of our greatest confusion. While we are still in that peculiar state of expecting everyone to congratulate us, we find that that isn't the reality of life. Those who seem to make us feel good and who REALLY UNDERSTAND us are members of our group. THEY understand and they are the ones who tell us how wonderful we are for quitting.

But when we are away from our group, all hell breaks loose and we feel angry all of the time. Angry and frustrated and ready to scream. We think about drinking every once in awhile but then we remember the remorse and the guilt feelings and the headache and the depression and we decide not to go back to that. But we can't understand what is going wrong.

Well, the truth of the matter is that nothing is going wrong. It's just that two things are happening, both of which are at cross purposes.

Your family is happy that you have quit drinking but the notion that they will probably display towards you in the beginning will be the anger they have been feeling for a long time. They are not about to congratulate you. Instead they finally want to tell you off... tell you how many times you spoiled their plans, how many times you insulted them, how many times they wished you were not a part of their family. Your sobriety is finally a time when they see you sober and know that what they say to you will at least register in your brain. So their reaction to your sobriety will not be what you have expected.

As for your kids, you now want to play Super Mom to make up for all the rough times but all they seem to do is stay away from home or yell at you. Why?

The reason for their reaction to you is that for the past several years, they have been taking care of you. They have looked over you, protected you, made excuses for you. They mothered you.

They are not about to regress to the age they were when your drinking started to affect their lives. And that is perhaps the saddest part of all in this scenario of sobriety. That part of your children's lives is lost to you and that is one of the biggest causes for the guilt you will battle in

your sobriety. And that is why the WFS “New Life” Program can help you, because you will have to know that “The past is gone forever.”

No matter how upsetting this fact of your life is... the lost years of your life with your children... nothing can be done about it except to accept that it is over, that you did the only possible thing for the disease you have... stopped drinking... and that you are a changed woman who will now try to understand the distance your children are putting between you. No matter how hard it will be for you to understand this, you must see that they are very, very angry with you because they missed you. They are hurting and have been hurting and they can't just suddenly be happy all of the time about your sobriety.

Sobriety does not make our problems go away. Sobriety is a time when our problems seem overwhelming, because we are seeing them with sober eyes, with a clear mind, and then we are very confused. That is when we ask if it is really all worth it?

Of course we know the answer to that. No matter how very bad things seem, there is no problem that drinking won't make worse. If there is one thought we should keep uppermost in our minds, it is that drinking makes everything worse and there will always be a day when we must sober up and look at the problems. That day cannot be put out of our lives. Our problems are there for us to deal with.

Early sobriety is a time when we come up against several hard truths that whatever we must do in life, we must do for ourselves and give up waiting for someone else to do them for us.

Added to our feelings of guilt in the early days is the feeling of anger we also experience. We are angry because what we have put off dealing with, we must face and deal with it now. The time of postponement is over. The time of doing is at hand.

Even worse than the anger we feel is the feeling of fear. And anxiety. We feel incapable. We know we can't do it. We know that this problem... or problems... is greater than we are and we just can't do it!

We are nervous, anxious, fearful and angry. We are squirming with these nagging emotions. Where can we turn?

This is the time when we must really live our new program, the “New Life” Program. This is the period when we most need the early morning time of meditation, when we can sit by a window and put our problems into proper order and sort out our emotions that are probably misplaced. Remember the suggestion of thinking about our problems in relation to eternity? How serious are they? If we had just one day to live, which problem could we eliminate? Are these problems as devastating as we are making them? Do they all require immediate solutions and/or decisions?

This early morning time is when we must begin to understand the strange reactions of our family. It is the time when we must know that our stopping drinking was, and is, the most important decision we have ever made in our lives. We now know that we are the victim of the disease of alcoholism and that we cannot tolerate alcohol in any form. And learning that this has been the cause of our inability to control our drinking, or our lives, is a relief. We had thought we were horrible persons.

But now that we know, we must grasp life and be on top of it, not be swayed or overcome by fear and anxiety. We know that we must practice feeling like a competent woman and then we will know that we are, because we will find this to be true. And this time of morning meditation will help us to understand our fear, our anxiety, our anger, and our guilt, and we will know that none

of this is justified.

Every day we will make certain we have the morning period of meditation to get our emotions right so that we are comfortable with ourselves. And we will know that we are capable of handling the daily pressures. And we will try to understand the anger of our family. And we will know that we have compassionate and understanding friends in our group. And we will know that every day we get better and life will be very rewarding. And we know now that all of this does not happen overnight... as we thought it would when we got sober, when we expected magic to happen and it didn't. ☞ [June 1986]

(This article is from *The Collection of Sobering Thoughts Booklet*, Volume 11 and copyrighted by Women for Sobriety, Inc., PO Box 618, Quakertown, PA 18951.)

Comments from Shirley "didit4me":

For a recent WFS meeting, I chose this article for discussion by the group. Why? Over the past couple months, several women joined the group and they are all new to recovery and have many questions and doubts about what is/was happening to them. One of their issues was the reactions of their families.

I still remember back to my early days...not in a negative fashion but a place of respect of where I was and what was happening, even if it was a fog at times. I remember the tears and the guilt. It is all part of the journey. My only regret now is that I hadn't embraced the WFS "New Life" Program at that early stage. I had purchased my Beginner's Special package and read Jean's literature but hadn't taken the courage to drive to the closest group meeting. (This is something I always tell anyone new to the group. The biggest step is walking into that first meeting... the unknown is always scary and so is recovery.)

There had been group discussions the previous week about how families were treating them. For example, how the family liked them sober but didn't know what to do with this changing person. The woman who was breaking into tears one moment and the next wanting to grab control of their lives and the lives of the people around them. How can they relate? How can everyone give up the caretaking role they had assumed of the woman who is now struggling with her recovery?

It was helpful for the women who have been around to relate how they had experienced all these same things. It gave them confirmation that they are not alone in their journey.

More examples came up... how the family had handled them carefully, possibly smelling them for booze on their breath or body, watching for signs of drunkenness. Some had dealt with promises from their families of little contact with grandchildren due to their addiction. I was quick to remind them that recovery has to be for ourselves first and then others later. The rewards are worth the journey.

Near the end of the evening, we discussed the part that our group was playing in their journey. One woman stated that she was amazed at the degree of sharing that takes place and the comfort we felt at saying what was troubling us. We seem to know instinctively that it is for that room only, not for others. How we could hand the Kleenex box to someone who needed it and then later laugh when something funny was said. That is part of what the group offers for the women who join us. Comfort, safety and caring are what our group represents. Thank you, Jean, for giving us the "New Life" Program. ☞ [October 2011]

Comments from Amy "AmyMarie":

When I first quit drinking I wasn't expecting anything. I had no idea what was going to happen. I just stopped drinking and went from there. One of the first problems I tackled was getting out of debt. I was in this mode that I wanted to bulldoze my way through all of my problems and get my life back under control. Eventually, once things were under control in regards to the damage I had done with drinking, I found myself in an odd place.

I must explain at this juncture that I have no family so all of the familial issues that Jean cited in her article do not apply to me. Most of the friends I had were drinking buddies so they were pretty much eliminated once I got sober. Most of the damage done was to myself, to my roommate and my boyfriend. I recognized in early sobriety the things I had done wrong to these two people and knew that the only way to "make amends" to them both was through staying sober, a "living amends" if you will. I had no issues with my boyfriend when I got sober. He was thrilled and was always filled with praise and did not seem to have any past transgressions on my part to bring up and be angry about. My roommate was a different story. In my early sobriety, he didn't display any anger towards me, that came later. Now he has a tendency to bring up things I did or said while I was drinking, even after over 5 years of me being sober. I get angry about it sometimes because there is nothing else I can do or say to demonstrate that I am sorry other than staying sober. Also I believe a part of him misses "toasty Amy" (as he likes to refer to me when I was drinking) because he took care of me and, now that I am sober, I guess he feels he is not needed. We have also grown apart because me, in my sober state, does not enjoy hanging out with him as much as I did when I was drinking.

I transgress, so let me get back on point. The odd place I found myself in was that I replaced my drinking addiction with an exercise addiction. I have always been active, so exercise was not new to me; however, I went way overboard and, as a result, I misaligned my pelvis which in turn led to a lot of pain that I struggled with for about 2 years and even now deal with to some

degree. This is where I started to believe that since I had quit drinking that nothing bad should ever happen to me. And, as Jean states in her article, I became very confused as to why I was going through this and, at moments, thought about drinking. I, of course, knew that drinking would only make my problems worse and cause me not to be able to handle it with a clear head.

Another issue that developed in early sobriety for me was a severe case of anxiety. I didn't have my old crutch to depend on to momentarily take away any worries or concerns I had. I didn't know how to live life and was always afraid that the worst thing would happen to me. I had been using the AA program on and off up until September of 2013 (my sobriety date is November 28, 2009) and it was not helping me to learn to live life. I found the principles of the program to be too harsh and depressing to use as a guide. I don't like to think of my liabilities as "character defects". It makes me feel as if I am defective. So, I was at my wits end and that is when I rediscovered WFS (I had tried WFS in the past, but did not actively participate in the program). That was the turning point for me.

It has been a slow process learning to deal with life's issues and being positive in my sober life; however, I am happy to report that I am making progress. As a result of utilizing Jean's 13 Statements, I now have the ability to do things for myself, deal with the ups and downs of life in a more productive and positive manner and the anxiety/fear is abating. I am "on top of life" and I am very proactive when it comes to my mental, physical and spiritual health. I still have a long way to go though and I do recognize it is a journey not a destination.

Early sobriety wasn't too difficult for me in regards to family issues. What was difficult for me was knowing how to live life and handling its obstacles. I will be honest and say that I believe I do not deserve to go through anymore hardships because I have been through so much in my life, before, during and after sobriety, and I believe I deserve smooth sailing beginning now and until the day I die. However, I do acknowledge that I must do my part to make sure my life "flows" and I do believe that if I do my part that the Universe will help me. ☞ [January 2015]

Comments from "Godiva214":

As human beings, we often find that a "new" situation brings anxiety and unease into our lives. Starting a new job, moving to a new home, starting a new, healthy relationship -- and certainly embarking on a life of sobriety -- are among the life changes that can seem overwhelming.

So, here we are, newly sober, struggling with the crushing guilt of past deeds and we have to summon the strength to navigate through unfamiliar, uncharted waters. Ugh. That sounds impossible! And why? Consider these realities:

1. "New" can be difficult because it is not familiar, not comfortable, not EASY.
2. Being in a "new" situation can create anxiety and unease.
3. Unease can trigger doubt.
4. Doubt in our abilities brings back our old pal, Low Self Esteem!
5. Low Self Esteem -- OMG, how hideous is it when she shows up? She brings along her evil twin, Negative Mindset.
6. When Low Self Esteem and Negative Mindset drop by (unexpected, of course, and usually at an inconvenient time), they always want to bring their chaotic cousin, Drinking/Drugging Behavior, into the toxic mix.

And we all know where things go when those three B!*\$#S show up.

Therefore, in Early Sobriety, I think it's OK to treat ourselves with kid gloves, so to speak. Realize that "regret is the poison of life" and yes, the past is gone forever. But, instead of concentrating on past mistakes, build a game plan for a better future -- one that's healthy and happy and full of the possibilities that you generate for yourself.

Above all, remember that when Low Self Esteem, Negative Mindset and Drinking/Drugging Behavior come around, you can tell them you're too busy to see them. Screen their calls. Don't return their messages. Get up, leave them behind and just walk outside for a breath of fresh air.

You have a new friend of your very own creation: The Future Is Now.

She is a true friend, one concerned with your best interests. And she can be whatever you want her to be! ☞ [January 2015]